



Washington State Department of Agriculture

News Release

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WSDA inspectors toss paperwork in favor of mobile phones, computers ***Info tracks produce, grains, specialty product inspection results to benefit industry***

OLYMPIA – While Washington’s farmers are wrapping up most harvests, pockets of work continues for varieties of late harvest apples, potatoes, grapes and other commodities. During this busy season, Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) inspectors play an important role in supporting the marketing of the state’s major farm and livestock products.

In addition to their skills in evaluating the quality of agricultural products, inspectors increasingly use technology to add value, contain costs and speed the ag inspection process so goods can get to market sooner.

This hop season, for example, WSDA scrapped its decades-old paper inspection forms and began using wireless devices to record key data regarding hop bale and lots inspected daily at farms and buyer warehouses. Office and laboratory paperwork also has been reduced as information from the mobile phones is now automatically imported into the program’s database.

WSDA’s hop samplers and inspectors are the latest agency program to use mobile phone operating systems in the field to record results. As the nation’s largest producer of hops, Washington growers rely on inspectors to sample 270,000 bales of hops and issue nearly 2,000 harvest certificates a year to facilitate sales and meet export requirements. Lab personnel test hops—which provide flavor and aroma in beer—for brewing value and other quality issues such as leaf, steam and seed percentages that can result in grower premiums.

“These efforts have provided faster service to our customers so they can access real-time inspection results to meet their information and marketing needs,” said Royal Schoen, manager of WSDA’s Chemical & Hop Laboratory in Yakima. “We’ve seen a 27 percent reduction in gross costs, which also helps to keep our inspection fees stable. Certainly our employees and industry have bought into the benefits.”

WSDA helps facilitate the movement of more than \$8 billion of commodities each year for domestic and export markets. WSDA inspects produce and grains grown in Washington, as well as other crops, such as soybeans, corn and wheat grown in other states. About 25 percent of U.S. grain exports move through Washington ports. And, Washington growers produce a larger volume of fruits and vegetables than farmers in any other state except California and Florida.

WSDA inspectors meet industry requests for an independent third-party review of commodities to satisfy customer and export requirements and help avoid shipping delays. WSDA’s growing use of technology is creating greater efficiencies and opportunities over the pencil and paper era. Cost savings are realized when program staff can be freed up to do other work by paring back on paperwork.

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State inspectors sample grains, fruits and vegetables to verify they meet size, grade and condition and that crops are free of disease and insects prohibited by domestic and international trading partners. As a result of the inspections, Washington's shippers can verify for their customers that they are reliable suppliers of quality commodities that meet buyers' specifications.

Automation of the Fruit & Vegetable Inspection Program at WSDA has continued with updated models of tablet computers that are more durable and operate faster since its introduction several years ago.

"The field computers are vital to capture and record inspection results, including inspection fees that are later invoiced electronically to WSDA's customers," said Jim Quigley, manager of the inspection program. "The electronic compliance data is available immediately versus waiting two or more days for paper certificates."

WSDA's Web-based services and accounts allow shippers, trade associations and commodity commissions to obtain real-time data for monitoring crop movement. Currently, 88 percent of produce shipped is done through electronic certificates of compliance stating the produce meets quality and condition standards, up from 66 percent by volume from 2006.

"They can get products to market faster and target their sales better using real time inspection data to generate shipping reports and identify marketplace trends," Quigley said. "Our ability to automate our processes helps us complete inspections within 24 hours of an industry inspection request so they have affordable, reliable information for produce at shipping points."

Compiling data electronically also assists WSDA and industry with the ability to trace back or forward produce if crop quality issues come up. Database documents can be accessed to connect produce from a specific shipper, grower or field to its final destination.

WSDA's grain inspection results also are available under a Web-based system, called the Grain Inspection Management System.

"All of our customers use this computer-based system in some manner," said Randy Deike, manager of the Grain Inspection Program. "About 90 percent use it to retrieve grade data or certificates and nearly all the customers use it for their account information regarding WSDA services. The ability to rapidly supply accurate certificates and inspection results via the Internet saves WSDA and our customers time and expense."

WSDA's fee-for-service inspection programs gear up staffing for harvest times in Washington, roughly April to October. Inspections are also conducted off-season when industry calls upon WSDA to check commodities from cold storage or grain elevators, co-operatives and river elevators.

Making investments in technology that speeds up the delivery of inspection results makes WSDA's produce and grain inspection programs more efficient, helps to keep inspection rates stable, and helps move industry commodities to market.